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POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY.

THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF ANDREW JACKSON.

ON the fourth of March, 1837, Andrew Jackson was able to review his completed official career with a degree of complacency rare, if not unique, in the annals of magistracies. It was an almost unbroken succession of victories that he looked back upon. He had signally triumphed over his political rivals, Clay and Calhoun. He had destroyed the bank, and broken the rule of the classes and the party which supported it. He had subjected Congress to his will, and extorted from the Senate the "expunging resolution." His course toward nullification had been courageous and consistent, and had increased his power and fame. His conduct of foreign relations had been successful. He had reorganized and disciplined the democratic party. He had named his successor. Moreover—and it was this that gratified him most—he believed that in all his warfare he had fought and won, not for himself, but for the people; and he knew from full and grateful testimony that this was their view, and that they honored him as their faithful and invincible champion. His farewell address testifies, it is true, to a feeling of disquietude on account of the growth of sectionalism. But for this he could not justly hold himself responsible; and his firm trust in the people, now through his agency masters of the state, reassured him.

The estimate of his own work, by one so little capable of impartial judgment as was Jackson, is, of course, not authoritative. Equally fallible are contemporary views of a man, respecting whom all ranged themselves as ardent friends or foes. It

is now, however, a half century since Jackson set out from the White House on his return to the Hermitage—a period long enough to reveal, with considerable distinctness, the real scope and nature of his work, and to lessen, if not remove, early prepossessions.

Of the lives of Jackson, Parton's, written during the period just preceding the Civil War, and Professor Sumner's, published in 1882, are the best. We possess also, in Professor von Holst's *Constitutional History of the United States*, a very able discussion of Jackson's character and political work.

On the extent to which personal feeling became a factor in Jackson's policy and the mischief resulting therefrom; on the usurpations by which a nominally republican administration was transformed into the really despotic "reign" of one man; on Jackson's spirit and methods in the bank controversy, Sumner and von Holst are in substantial accord. They condemn without reserve. Parton, although lenient in particulars, reaches a similar verdict. Jackson's course towards nullification receives praise. Sumner, however, qualifies his approval as follows: "Nullification involved directly the power and prestige of the federal government, and he would certainly be a most exceptional person who, being President of the United States, would allow the government of which he was the head to be defied and insulted."¹ And later, commenting on the proclamation to the people of South Carolina: "He lives in popular memory and tradition chiefly as the man who put down this treason, but the historian must remember that, if Jackson had done his duty to Georgia and the Indians, nullification would never have attained any strength."² Parton holds the widely prevalent opinion that Jackson is responsible for the "spoils system" in national politics.³ Sumner dissents. "It is a crude and incorrect notion," he says, "that Andrew Jackson corrupted the civil service. His administration is only the date at which a corrupt use of the spoils of the public service as a cement for party organization under the democratic-republican

¹ Sumner, Jackson, 219.

² Sumner, Jackson, 283.

³ Parton, Jackson, III., 692.

self-government, having been perfected into a highly finished system in New York and Pennsylvania, was first employed in the federal arena.”¹ Von Holst’s views are similar. He thinks that Jackson, by vigorous resistance, could have put off the evil day. “But, by this means, only a short delay would have been gained. To prevent the evil, it was necessary to avert its causes, and to do this there was need of something more than a powerful will ; a single person could assuredly not do it.”²

We have been looking at single features and measures. What of the administration as a whole ? Parton’s view is as follows : “I must avow explicitly the belief that, notwithstanding the good done by General Jackson during his presidency, his elevation to power was a mistake on the part of the people of the United States. The good which he effected has not continued, while the evil which he began remains.”³ Sumner, in commenting on “Jackson’s modes of action in his second term,” says : “We must say of Jackson that he stumbled along through a magnificent career, now and then taking up a chance without really appreciating it ; leaving behind him disturbed and discordant elements of good and ill just fit to produce turmoil and disaster in the future.”⁴ Later he adds : “Representative institutions are degraded on the Jacksonian theory just as they are on the divine-right theory, or on the theory of the democratic empire. There is not a worse perversion of the American system of government conceivable than to regard the President as the tribune of the people.”⁵ The view of von Holst may be inferred from the following passages : “In spite of the frightful influence, in the real sense of the expression, which he exercised during the eight years of his presidency, he neither pointed out nor opened new ways to his people by the superiority of his mind, but only dragged them more rapidly onward on the road they had long been travelling, by the demoniacal power of his will.”⁶ The meaning of the bank struggle is thus defined : “Its significance lay in the elements which made Jack-

¹ Sumner, Jackson, 147.

² Von Holst, II., 14.

³ Parton, Jackson, 694.

⁴ Sumner, Jackson, 279.

⁵ Sumner, Jackson, 280.

⁶ Von Holst, II., 30, 31.

son able actually and successfully to assert his claims, in conflict both with the constitution and with the idea of republicanism, to a position between Congress and the people as patriarchal ruler of the republic."¹ Elsewhere he tells us that the "curse of Jackson's administration" is that it weakened respect for law; that "the first clear symptom" of "the decline of a healthy political spirit" was the election and re-election of Jackson to the presidency; that his administration paved a "broad path for the demoralizing transformation of the American democracy"; and that "his 'reign' receives the stamp which characterizes it, precisely from the fact that the politicians knew how to make his character, with its texture of brass, the battering-ram with which to break down the last ramparts which opposed their will."²

According to Parton, Sumner, and von Holst, as I understand them, the net result of Jackson's influence upon the American people was to hasten their progress toward political ruin. I think this conclusion erroneous. The gravest accusation against Jackson is, that his influence undermined respect for law. It is plausibly argued that, since he himself was impatient of authority, his example must have stimulated lawlessness in his followers. It may be urged, in reply, that the history of the country does not support the charge. The worst exhibitions of general lawlessness which have disgraced the United States were the anti-abolitionist mobs of Jackson's own day — for which he was not responsible. Since then, the American people, in spite of the demoralizations of the war and reconstruction periods, have steadily grown in obedience to law. The turbulence of un-Americanized immigrants, although it may hurt American reputation, is not an expression of American character. That we are essentially a law-abiding people, the contested presidential election of 1876 strongly testifies. Devotion to the state and obedience to formal law come, at times, into conflict. In such cases, obedience to law, if persisted in, would give us the civilization of Asia. Disregard of formal law, in order to serve the state more

¹ Von Holst, II., 67, 68.

² Von Holst, II., 149.

efficiently, is a distinctive feature of European and American civilization. In this sense, Cæsar, Luther, Hampden, and Washington were law-breakers. Between these, and those who break the law for the sake of power or passion, or self-love in any form, the difference is world-wide. The acts of the former are recognitions of political duty; the acts of the latter are denials. In the Indian Wars and the War of 1812-14, strict deference to the inefficient management at Washington would have made success impossible. Jackson took matters into his own hands, and, in times when failure and chagrin were the order of the day, was brilliantly successful. If the people took note of the insubordination, they also took note of the patriotic motive which prompted it. The lessons of the camp he carried into civil life. He regarded himself as the highest representative of the entire people, commissioned by them to secure their welfare. The undoubted usurpations which followed were never recognized as such by Jackson. On the contrary, he believed himself the staunchest upholder of the constitution. And the people agreed with him. Unconscious violations of law may entail suffering, but they do not demoralize; they do not weaken respect for law.

Another charge is, that Jackson ruled his party through personal methods, and that he drew to his aid irresponsible counsellors. It is true: through the "kitchen cabinet" and the "Globe," he maintained a personal relationship with his followers not unlike that of a Highland chieftain to his clansmen two centuries ago. This relationship was unfavorable to the free exercise of individual judgment, and perhaps to self-respect. What went far, however, towards justifying it, was the undeveloped political character of many of Jackson's partisans. Personal politics were a necessity to them. Their choice lay between the stern drill of Jackson and the blandishments of the demagogue. The methods best adapted to the Whigs were out of the question. It is fair, in judging Jackson's course as a party leader, to remember that he worked with and for the lower strata of political society.

It is a curious circumstance that the relation of Jackson to

sectionalism has received very little attention ; and yet the growth of sectionalism, *i.e.*, the tendency to divide the Union into two portions, politically separate and independent, is the fact which, from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 to the ordinances of secession in 1860, gives our political history its distinctive character. The one important question concerning Jackson, as indeed concerning every public man during the forty years which precede the Civil War, is : What did he do towards saving the Union from sectionalism ?

The first step towards an answer is to discriminate between state rights and sectionalism. State rights seek the widest extension of local self-government within state lines : sectionalism seeks political independence for a group of states. State sovereignty, so-called, is a perverted form of state rights. State sovereignty has, as a matter of fact, never existed. No state has ever presented the conditions which make real sovereignty practicable and desirable. We doubt whether any state has ever for a moment soberly wished to assume and maintain real sovereignty. A fancied state sovereignty has, from time to time, been invoked in order to extort concessions from the national government, as was done by South Carolina in 1832 ; or in order to effect a peaceful and apparently legal escape from the sovereignty of the United States to a new sovereignty in the process of creation, as was done by the Southern states in 1860 and 1861. But in neither case was the assumption and maintenance of real state sovereignty contemplated. It is true that states call themselves sovereign ; but the word does not create the fact — sovereignty must first exist in the nature of things. State rights, apart from sectionalism, have never been a serious hindrance to the progress of national unity. The possibility of their becoming so lessens every day, because the interests which unite the states and the preponderance, physical and moral, of the Union as a whole over any one state, increase daily. Sectionalism, on the other hand, is, by its very nature, incipient disunion. The first strongly marked appearance of sectionalism was in New England, just before and during the War of 1812-14. At the close of the war, with the removal of

grievances, it came suddenly to an end. The second appearance of sectionalism was due to divergence of interests and views between North and South, caused by the institution of slavery. In both cases sectionalism wore the mask of state rights, because in that way it could gain an appearance of legality while pursuing a course essentially revolutionary.

It is demonstrable, however, that sectionalism, particularly when based on slavery, is incompatible with state rights. Sectionalism, fully developed, means disunion; in the place of one united people it would create two or more hostile peoples with conflicting interests, and without natural boundaries. Wars and colossal armaments would follow, and in their train centralization, the destroyer of state rights and of local self-government in every form. Although our Civil War lasted but four years, it almost transformed the character of the government. The entire previous period since the administration of Washington had not effected so great a centralization. It is also demonstrable that Southern sectionalism, before reaching the point of attempted disunion, became hostile to state rights. The fugitive slave law of 1850, and the *Dred Scott* decision were affronts to the strongest sentiments which sustain state rights. The course of the South during the Kansas struggle was destructive of state rights. There could not be a more distinct violation of their essential principle than the attempt to establish slavery in a territory against the will of its inhabitants. Indeed, it was the treason of Southern sectionalism to state rights as well as to the Union that divided the democratic party in 1860. The resort to secession has a similar meaning. The election of Lincoln did not imperil state rights; but it did deprive slavery of the sympathizing, docile support of the general government—a support to which it had long been accustomed—and threw it back upon its unimpaired constitutional guaranties and the rights of the states. But these were not enough. Slavery could prosper only through the fostering care of a national government, and it was to secure this that the South seceded.

Jackson came before the country as a disciple of Jefferson,

and therefore as a believer in state rights. There was, it is true, much in his temper and situation which favored centralization; nevertheless, he was an honest, though moderate and somewhat inconsistent Jeffersonian, and he won and retained the confidence of the state-rights element in the democratic party. Moreover, he identified himself with the newly enfranchised and poorer citizens just rising to political self-consciousness. In these ways, his following came to include a large majority of his fellow-citizens, and, what was of the utmost importance, by far the larger proportion of those whose political character and opinions were as yet plastic. Jackson's great contemporaries, Clay and Webster, could not reach these. Both were identified, through their party relations, with the higher classes, and both were disqualified through peculiar elements of character for popular leadership. In his tastes and intellectual sympathies, Clay was far removed from the "sons of toil." His skill in contriving compromises, although exerted for patriotic ends, did not impress the imagination of the people. Straightforward, blunt methods are their preference. There was something, too, in Clay's course as candidate for the presidency that seemed to hint at overcalculation, irresolution, and even timidity — qualities which, once suspected, are a fatal bar to the confidence of the populace. Webster never touched the popular heart. His almost matchless eloquence appealed most strongly to statesmen, jurists, and those classes whose culture and imagination enabled them to forecast the future and made them susceptible to grand ideas. The masses had a confused sense of Webster's greatness; but it did not win them. It served rather to emphasize the difference between him and themselves. Webster's devotion to national unity seemed, in great measure, to arise from a contemplation of the country's destined place in the world's history. It was the greatness yet to come that he beheld, and by which he was inspired. Jackson's interest in national unity, on the contrary, seemed to grow out of his regard for the people then living, his contemporaries. It was their will that he consulted, and their plaudits that he cared for. To the people, Webster's claims seemed based on

his superiority to themselves; Jackson's, on his devotion to themselves. Their decision could not be doubtful. The result was that Jackson became, to a degree never realized by any other man in our history, the trusted leader and teacher of the masses. Of this relationship Sumner says: "Jackson came to power as the standard-bearer of a new upheaval of democracy and under a profession of new and fuller realization of the Jeffersonian democratic-republican principles."¹ Also: "One can easily discern in Jackson's popularity an element of instinct and personal recognition by the mass of the people. They felt: 'He is one of us,' 'He stands by us.'"² Very explicit on this point is von Holst: "Jackson was the man of the masses, because by his origin and his whole course of development, both inner and outer, he belonged to them."³ Most felicitous is the statement of Jackson's political relation to the people: "The supporters of his policy were the instincts of the masses; the sum and substance of it, the satisfaction of those instincts."⁴

This intimate relation to the people, and this unparalleled power over the people, Jackson used to impress upon them his own love of the Union and his own hatred of sectionalism. The victory at New Orleans and the proclamation to the people of South Carolina in 1832 are the two facts which did most to reveal Jackson's personality, and they are altogether national facts. The one portrays him as the defender of the Nation against foreign enemies; the other, against sectionalism. His character was altogether national. It is easy to think of Calhoun as a southerner and a South Carolinian; but it would not be easy to think of Jackson as belonging to Tennessee or to the border states. The distribution of his support in the election of 1832 is instructive. New Hampshire, New York and Pennsylvania, as well as Tennessee, Georgia and Missouri, were Jackson's states. He was not looked upon as the representative of any particular section. His policy as President showed no trace of sectionalism. Its aim was

¹ Sumner, Jackson, 136.

² Sumner, Jackson, 138.

³ Von Holst, II., 3.

⁴ Von Holst, II., 31.

the welfare of the masses irrespective of section. To him state lines had little meaning ; sectional lines, absolutely none.

There is another way in which he rendered great though unconscious service to the cause of national unity : he made the government, hitherto an unmeaning abstraction, intelligible and attractive to the people. Bagehot says : "The best reason why monarchy is a strong government is that it is an intelligible government. The mass of mankind understand it, and they hardly anywhere in the world understand any other."¹

The chief value, then, of Jackson's political career, was its educational effect. His strong conviction of the national character of the Union, his brave words and acts in behalf of the rights of the Union, sank deep into the hearts of followers and opponents. The fact of national unity grew more real and attractive through his definition and defence. It is, perhaps, not too much to say that it was Jackson who made "peaceable" secession impossible. The spirit of Jackson's administration as a whole, the acts through which he influenced most deeply and permanently the political character of the people, are in accord with his resistance to nullification. Their tendency was to *nationalize*.

The greatness of his service was hidden for a time. Sectionalism, under the influence of slavery and the agitation against slavery, developed rapidly in the North as well as in the South ; but when the doubtful struggle began, it was in obedience to the teachings of Jackson that the Northern Democrats put aside their scruples against "coercion," and resolutely engaged in the war for the Union. Were it not for him, the issue of the conflict between '61 and '65 might well have been other than it was.

ANSON D. MORSE.

¹ Bagehot, English Constitution, 101.